

**BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL:  
IMPACT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITI  
SAINS MALAYSIA**

**by**

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بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

**DEDICATION**

To my beloved husband, Arman Jamshidi,  
For his encouragement, support, love and sacrifice

To my lovely parents,  
Mohammadreza Khosravi, Akhtar Heydari  
For their unreserved love and faith in me

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATION**

DSM	:	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder
GHQ	:	General Health Questionnaire
HREC	:	Human Research Ethics Committee USM
IASSW:		International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	:	International Federation of Social Workers
IPS	:	Institute of Postgraduate Studies
SPSS	:	Statistical Packages for Social Sciences
USM	:	Universiti Sains Malaysia
WHO	:	World Health Organization

**PEMBANGUNAN MODAL SOSIAL:  
IMPAK TERHADAP KESEJAHTERAAN MENTAL PELAJAR  
ANTARABANGSA DI UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRAK**

Kebanyakan kajian empirikal berkaitan modal sosial telah mengesahkan bahawa wujudnya hubungan di antara modal sosial dan kesihatan mental. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian untuk menilai proses intervensi yang direka untuk meningkatkan tahap modal sosial dan kesannya ke atas kesihatan mental dalam kalangan pelajar antarabangsa didapati masih lagi berkurangan. Kajian ini bertujuan menunjukkan jurang yang wujud dengan menilai sama ada pembinaan program modal sosial boleh meningkatkan modal sosial dan kesihatan mental pelajar antarabangsa di Universiti Sains Malaysia. Kajian ini cuba meneliti (1) jika wujud hubungan di antara modal sosial dan kesihatan mental pelajar antarabangsa; (2) jika pembinaan program modal sosial merupakan satu kaedah yang berkesan untuk meningkatkan modal sosial pelajar antarabangsa; (3) sejauh mana pembinaan program modal sosial mampu meningkatkan komponen modal sosial dalam kumpulan eksperimental; dan (4) sama ada pembinaan program modal sosial merupakan satu kaedah yang berkesan untuk meningkatkan kesihatan mental pelajar antarabangsa. Kaedah metodologi campuran telah digunakan bagi tujuan pengumpulan dan analisis data. Seramai 60 pelajar antarabangsa yang baru berdaftar di Universiti Sains Malaysia telah direkrut dan dibahagikan kepada kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan (*control group*). Kumpulan eksperimen telah mengikuti program modal sosial selama 3 bulan. Kedua-dua kumpulan tersebut kemudiannya telah memberi respon melalui penggunaan instrumen GHQ28 dan soal selidik modal sosial sebelum dan selepas intervensi. Data kualitatif turut dikumpul

melalui penilaian pelajar, teks lain yang dikemukakan semasa intervensi dan soal selidik terbuka. Kedua-dua data kuantitatif dan kualitatif telah dianalisis melalui SPSS (*Statistical Packages for Social Sciences*) versi 21 dan perisian NVivo 10 setiap satunya. Dapatan kajian telah menunjukkan wujudnya hubungan korelasi di antara modal sosial dan kesihatan mental. Pembinaan program modal sosial adalah efektif dalam meningkatkan modal sosial dan komponennya. Antara komponen modal sosial yang meliputi kognitif, struktural dan ikatan modal sosial boleh meramal modal sosial secara keseluruhan. Manakala, *bridging social capital* pula bukan merupakan peramal signifikan kepada keseluruhan modal sosial. Juga, pembangunan program modal sosial adalah efektif dalam pembangunan kesihatan mental. Antara komponen modal sosial yang telah dibentuk, modal sosial kognitif dan struktural boleh meramal kesihatan mental, manakala ikatan modal sosial dan *bridging social capital* tidak dapat menyumbang ke arah meramal kesihatan mental. Di samping itu, keputusan kualitatif turut menunjukkan bahawa pembinaan modal sosial yang efektif boleh meningkatkan semua komponen modal sosial dan subskalanya. Kesimpulannya, hasil kajian semasa telah menyumbang kepada bukti empirikal bahawa pembinaan program modal sosial berdasarkan kumpulan sokong bantu (*self-help*) dan latihan kemahiran sosial boleh meningkatkan lagi modal sosial dan kesihatan mental pelajar antarabangsa. Rangka kerja konseptual ini boleh membantu pekerja sosial untuk mengaplikasi teori modal sosial ke dalam praktis. Begitu juga, pengamal kerja sosial perlu mengambil kira intervensi sebegini bagi memaksimumkan manfaat daripada modal sosial. Memandangkan hasil kajian ini masih lagi baru, maka kajian tambahan diperlukan untuk mengaitkan teori, penyelidikan dan praktis yang lebih terkini.

**BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL:  
IMPACT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
AT UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

Many empirical studies related to social capital have confirmed that there are relationship between social capital and mental health. However, little research has been conducted to evaluate interventions designed to improve the level of social capital and its impact on the mental health of international students. This research aimed to address the gaps by examining whether the building social capital program can improve social capital and mental health of international students at Universiti Sains Malaysia. This research aimed to examine (1) if there is a relationship between social capital and mental health of international students; (2) whether building social capital program is an effective method for improving social capital for the international students; (3) how the building social capital program can enhance the social capital components among experimental group; and (4) whether building social capital program is an effective method for improving mental health among international students. A mixed-method design was employed in order to collect and analyze the data. A total of 60 newly registered international students at Universiti Sains Malaysia were recruited and assigned to non-randomized experimental and control groups. The experimental group participated in a 3 month program. Both experimental and control group were then responded to the GHQ-28 instrument and social capital questionnaire before and after the intervention. Qualitative data were also collected through the participants' evaluations, texts produced during the intervention and an open question questionnaire. Both of the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences

(SPSS) Version 21 and NVivo 10 software programs, respectively. Study findings have revealed that there was a correlation between social capital and mental health. The building social capital program was effective in developing social capital and its components. Among the developed social capital components, cognitive, structural and bonding social capital could predict total social capital. While bridging social capital was not a significant predictor of total social capital. Also the building social capital program was effective in developing mental health. Among developed social capital components, cognitive and structural social capital could predict mental health while bonding and bridging social capital did not make any contribution in predicting mental health. In addition, qualitative results showed that the building social capital has effectively improved all components of social capital and their sub-scales. As a conclusion, findings from the current study have provided empirical evidences that building social capital program based on self-help group and training of social skills was effective in improving social capital and mental health of international students. This conceptual framework can help social workers to apply the theory of social capital into practice. In addition, social work practitioners should consider such an intervention for targeted populations in order to maximize the benefits of social capital. Since empirical investigations in this field are relatively new, additional research is needed to advance theory, research and practice.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on building social capital and its impacts on the mental health of international students in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). This chapter consists of a detailed overview of the study. The problem statement, the significance of the study, research objective, research questions, and hypotheses are presented in this chapter.

#### 1.1 Overview

According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health, mental health has different kinds of activities that have a direct or indirect relation with mental well-being elements. The last definition of health is: "*A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease*" (WHO, 2012, p. 1). The definition is associated to the endorsement of well-being, the prevention of mental disorders, and the treatment and rehabilitation of people affected by mental disorders. Promotion of mental health is so essential to the new public health and the policies related to promotion of health. Further, there are strong proofs that public health and social interventions are effective in promoting mental health of people (Herrman, Moodie, & Saxena, 2008).

University students are faced with stressors due to their intermediary nature of their life, because they have to deal and get used to the future requirements of the life such as lifestyle, friends, religion, family, and job (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Further, the mental health of these students will be affected by different issues such as changing in eating and sleeping habits, dealing with financial issues, loneliness, independent decision, situate social activities apart from families, carrying duties

alone changing in relationship, and find new friends (Samari, Lalifaz, & Askari, 2006).

Several studies regarding international students' problems reveal that they are highly affected by mental health issues in comparison with other students (Alavi & Mansor, 2011; Altbach, 1991). Notably, the most significant negative impact over the physiological well-being of the international students including depression and loneliness is coming from losing the social support system. International students might be faced by a social isolation because of psychological stressors, especially changing the supporting system (Lin & Yi, 1997), due to their move to another country and leaving their families and friends (Lui, 2009; Sandhu, 1994).

In view of the remarkable trend of students to attend international studies and also probable mental health problems which they will be faced, there is a need to look beyond the mental health issues in international students and to find an effective intervention to improve their mental health. One of the helpful intervention is Building Social Capital Program, which is recently suggested by so many researches as an effective method of intervention for improvement of mental health (Baum, 1999; Baum et al., 2000; Carlson & Chamberlain, 2003; Edwards & Foley, 1998; Edwards, Foley, & Diani, 2001; Fujiwara & Kawachi, 2008; Hawe & Shiell, 2000; Kawachi, Kennedy, & Glass, 1999; Leeder & Dominello, 1999; Lomas, 1998; Lynch, DUE, Muntaner, & Smith, 2000; Moss, 2002; Muntaner, Lynch, & Smith, 2001; Pearce & Davey Smith, 2003; Pilkington, 2002; Putnam, 2001; Yip et al., 2007; Ziersch, Baum, Darmawan, Kavanagh, & Bentley, 2009).

This study was an empirical analysis of social capital and mental health that aimed to examine some of the lingering uncertainties in the previous studies related to building social capital, and its association with mental health. First, this study

investigated the relationship between social capital and its components with mental health. In most of the current literature, it is assumed that different components of social capital (cognitive, structural, bonding and bridging) may not have the same strength and direction of associations with mental health outcomes. So that, it was quite reasonable to hypothesize that different component of social capital may operate in a different way related to mental health.

Another very important, but even less examined area, was whether a program which is the combination of self-help initiative and some trained social skills in order to building social capital generates social capital and its components. In most of the prior studies, there is some suggestion in order to build social capital but, unfortunately, there was a huge lack of the literature in this regards. Further, another problem related to building social capital was that the same program cannot be applied for different contexts so it could be one of the reasons for the lack of literature in the area of building social capital. By the end, it was examined also if the program was successful in developing social capital and what was the association of the developed social capital with the mental health of the international students.

In summary, the empirical social capital and mental health literature was limited in at least three aspects: little exploration of how social capital can be developed among international students; no examination of weather a combination of self-help group and trained social skills can develop social capital of international students; lack of investigation of whether social capital generates differential mental health returns for international students: The current empirical study built on earlier theoretical discussions of social capital and mental health to fill gaps by explicitly investigating the relationship between social capital and mental health among



international students as well as examining the building social capital program in developing social capital and the potentially differential returns of different dimensions of the social capital for the mental health among international students. Shortly, current study investigated whether the building social capital program which was a combination of self-help initiative and trained social skills can be used as an effective program to improve the level of social capital and mental health of newly registered international students.

The process of building social capital program is an innovative prevention in the micro and macro social work program which are involved in mental health issues.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

In today's world, over 450 million people are suffering from mental disorders (WHO, 2003). During 1990's, behavioral and mental disorders were covering around 10% of the global disease burden all over the world. It is expected to rise to 15% in 2020. Besides spiritual, physical, and financial well-being, mental health is a critical part of person's life. The significance argument between experts is the notion if the healthy mind is a key to the individual to gain satisfaction in life (Swami et al., 2007). The definition of mental health according to the WHO (2014) is a condition of individual's well-being when he/she finds out his/her capabilities in order to deal with the regular stresses in life, the ability of working in an effective way, and productively and the possibility of supplying his/her community. Issues related to mental health should be given a prompt attention since the individual needs to deal with various kinds of stressors in his/her life, carrying out daily tasks with effortlessness and fulfilling responsibilities to his/her family and the nation at large. According the illustrated issues, the number of mental health problems among

university students is increasing each year, which shows that this problem deserves an immediate attention (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009). Beside this increasing number of students who are suffering from mental health problems, the severity of problems are increasing also (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 2006; Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000; Zivin et al., 2009). However, still, there is scarcity of trustworthy data that delves into the mental health issues rate along with the university student (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

In comparison with similar age groups in the general population, students who are studying in universities are more at risk of developing mental health problems or disorders (Hamdan-Mansour, Halabi, & Dawani, 2009; Nordin, Talib, Yaacob, & Sabran, 2010; Stewart-Brown et al., 2000). Different studies around the world have been carried out to recognize factors that affect the mental health of students since deprived mental health has been recognized as the most important reason for suicidal behavior, a sense of helplessness (Kay, Li, Xia, & Nokkaew, 2009) and lower educational successes (Puskar & Marie Bernardo, 2007). While College students often assume as advantaged population, they are not by any mean immune to the suffering and disabilities that are related to a mental health problem.

More deep, in comparison with other university students, international students appear to show more mental health issues (Alavi & Mansor, 2011; Andrade, 2006; Bektaş, 2008; Budianto, 2012; Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, & Kondakci, 2011; Chen, 1999; Choi, 1997; Crockett et al., 2007). Sovic (2009) illustrated that most international students have different backgrounds, culture, experience and skills. Consequently, they face more difficulties in adapting to the new situation. Adjusting to new circumstances on its own can be challenging, which leads to a very stressful experience. Academic demands may put international

students at a greater risk as opposed to students in general because they are faced with the unique challenge of adjusting to a new culture. International students are highly possibly to feel a deep sense of confusion as well as a major decrease in social support systems when they move to another country (Budianto, 2012; Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009). Obviously, loneliness and depression are mostly leaded by the negative impact on the psychological well-being of the international students, because of leaving family and friends (Lui, 2009; Sandhu, 1994). Also, international students will have a feeling of social isolation caused by the psychological stressors that comes from the change of supporting systems (Lin & Yi, 1997).

Worldwide, from the year 2000 to 2008, the number of foreign students has been mostly doubled from 1.8 million to 3.3 million (OECD, 2010). It is estimated that between 4.1 million and 6.7 million students will be studying abroad by 2020 (Calderon, 2010). Malaysian institutions of higher education are also motivated to attract international students from other countries. Institute of higher learning in Malaysia currently has more than 90,000 international students (Abdullah, 2009; Yusliza, 2010; Yusliza, & Chelliah, 2010).

According to the statistics from the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS), USM, the number of postgraduate students at USM from 2009-2011 has increased from 7,469 to 9,057. The percentage of international students is 24.85% for 2009 and has increased to 25.65% in 2011 a clear indication of the international growth. These international students are mostly from Middle East, specifically, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Egypt. Other students are from Africa such as Libya and Nigeria. Further, several international students are coming from south and south east Asia, such as Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, China, as well as Indonesia and Myanmar. And some are coming from Europe (Segi

Annual Report, 2010). Since international students come from diverse backgrounds which are far different than their host country, they tend to be confronted with cultural shock clearly; these issues are the challenges facing the higher learning education (Bektaş, 2008; Directgov, 2011; Lin, 2010).

While researches on international students' mental health are still scarce, there is higher probability that this population faces a greater risk for a compromised mental health due to the acculturative stressors and the loss of support network during their relocation to Malaysia. Although some researches regards international students' problems in Malaysian universities (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010) there are no obvious researches about their mental health problems. The researcher put so much effort to find any information regards mental health problem among international students in USM but unfortunately to date there is no research has been done in this regards. Since the number of international students is increasing in Malaysia, the necessity to recognize their psychological and social problems becomes absolutely necessary for proper meaningful and successful preventative mental health interventions. Furthermore, in view of the remarkable trend of students to attend international studies and also probable mental health problems which they will faced, social workers, psychologists and sociologists should pay more attention to prevention programs in order to the decrease of mental health problems among international students. This present study thus delves into represent this attempt.

Besides all mentioned issues, around the world, many universities and colleges have communications to assist the caseload along with students who are experiencing mental health issues, comprising counseling centers and staff alike such as psychiatrists who can help students to address their mental health issue

(Stone & Archer, 1990). However, most mental health services like counseling centers that are located on campuses appear to be treatment oriented and not preventative. In fact, they are mostly created to assist students who have been already involved with some level of psychological dysfunction services, ignoring the preventative factor (Landow, 2006). Like another places that they are dealing with mental health issues, the prominence of the treatment in mental health services in universities should be changed to the preventative mental health services that are formed to aid students avoid developing mental health problems (McDonald, Pritchard, & Landrum, 2006), because mental health issues could be organized and decreased, but it is hard to be completely cured and relapse is also common. Where cure is not possible and an illness is chronic, prevention is important.

Unfortunately, the researcher consistently observed that preventative mental health interventions are so rare at USM. Besides, there is no specific clinic or center as counseling center at USM to professionally deal with the mental health issues of the students. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the mental health situation of international students in USM and how they are able to develop their level of social capital as a prevention of mental health issues. To develop a better understanding of this focused subject, a quasi-experimental research is mandatory rather than merely studying the level of social capital and mental health of international students.

Adding to the issues mentioned related to mental health of international students, there are large deviation in mental health issues' rate among different areas and countries. These variations are not due simply to the physical environment or to genes. The social environment is increasingly being implicated and proffered as the cause. In developing preventative intervention in order to counter the mentioned factors which are the main reason for psychological problems, a deep understanding

of social factors is quite important. Studies related to mental health lay emphasis on the interaction between psychological, social and environmental variables. Social variables aside, social capital is very comprehensive and its effectiveness of different levels of living has particular importance in defining mental health. Putnam (1993) argued that the concept of social capital is one of the most important ways to look at the relationship between society and mental health through it. The social capital concept is referring to several features of social life, for instance, institutions, norms of reciprocity, networks, social trust, and the social interactions and its quantity and quality and facilitate mutual benefits collective actions and coordination. Some aspects of social capital, such as trust, social support, and social networks are very important determinants of the mental health of individuals (Patel, 2010).

Leaving their own country, international students lose their previous social networks and supports. Unfortunately, not all newcomers have the luxury of having an established social support network in their new environment. For international students, the significant physical distance between them and their family and friends back home could be especially daunting and could lead to feelings of isolation and homesickness. In this regard, Portes (1998) described the importance of social capital that is the ability to obtain benefits through membership in social networks, among immigrants. Incoming immigrants rely on the resources of their ethnic community in the host country to assist with jobs and business endeavors. Those who have a larger and richer social capital in their new environment tend to experience less acculturative stress than those who do not. For international students, the lack of social support and social network in the new country could also

mean the absence of social capital that could help them in dealing with surrounding mental health issues.

While so many previous studies were focusing on the culture shock that have been experienced by international students and its impact on their mental health, almost none has attempted to document building social capital process and its impact on mental health of international students. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore the level of mental health and social capital among international students and also to find an effective interventional program for them. In fact, this is the time to bring theory to the practice.

In short, international students are exposed to a vast variety of influences and effects that may impact on their well-being generally and their mental health more specifically. This study is one of the first attempts at determining whether, among international students, social capital renewal has a better mental health payoff.

In addition, some researchers mentioned that building social capital along with clients, in the individual and community level are one of the social workers' tasks (Naparstek & Dooley, 1997; Nelson, Pancer, Hayward, & Peters, 2005) which unfortunately, there is still a tangible lack of researches related to development of the social capital in social work education and research. In order to develop social capital in a macro practice level, the social workers should go beyond interventions which are dealing with individuals. And these interventions are usually based on concerns, needs, and problems recognized in working with clients. Macro social work practice could occur in different areas. Rothman, Erlich, and Tropman (2001) considered communities, organizations, and small groups as arenas of social work intervention. Groups are defined as *"a tangible collection of people who can discuss matters personally and work together in close association"* (Rothman et al., 2001, p.

13). In the process of developing social capital, one of the most important principles is the facilitating social contact (Offe & Fuchs, 2002). Consequently, conducting groups to promote social interaction between participants is an essential task for social workers and other professionals who are involved in building social capital programs (Angelusz & Tardos, 2001; Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2002). There is a need in social work research and practice to concentrate on the social capital development. To the research's knowledge, no studies have been carried out to analyze the building social capital program among international students and whether it impacts international students' mental health. Hence, studying and examining a program associated with development of social capital among international students population promises to be illuminating for the literature as well as for mental health policy making. In this regard, the current research focused on combination of self- help initiative with some trained social skills aimed to build social capital among international students in order to prevent mental health problem from occurring.

As mentioned above, USM is an international university that desperately needs some preventative mental health interventions in order to protect the international student from mental health breakdowns. Thus, the questions that remain unanswered and will be answered in this research are: What is the relationship between social capital and mental health of international students? Is building social capital program is an effective method for improving the social capital among international students? How does the building social capital program influence the social capital components among the international students who participated as an experimental group? Is building social capital program an effective method for improving the mental health among international students?



Therefore, a systematic evidence-based study is needed to answer these potential questions on the international student at USM. Unfortunately, studies in the field of social capital have paid attention generally to the statistical relationship between social capital and mental health, economic conditions, and governance. In retrospect, current research is unique and rare in Malaysia and limited around the world with a strong interest in adding innovative progressive approaches to evaluative interventions with the primary goal to develop the levels of social capital and mental health in university students.

In conclusion, as the empirical social capital and mental health literature is limited in some aspects: little exploration of how social capital is linked with mental health among international students in Malaysia; lack of investigation of whether applied social interventions could be associated with developing social capital; and no examination of whether if the intervention have association in developing social capital, how is the association of this developed social capital with mental health of international students. So that the current empirical study built on earlier theoretical discussions of social capital and mental health to filled gaps by explicitly investigating the relationship between social capital and mental health among international students and the potentially differential returns of social capital components for mental health among international students. Specifically, by conceptualizing building social capital program, the present study first examined the relationship between social capital and its components with mental health among international students at USM. It then investigated the potential associations between building social capital program and social capital outcomes among international students, as well as whether the built social capital also had associations with mental health outcomes.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

The general objective of the current study was to assess whether building social capital program can improve social capital and mental health of international students at USM. The following are the specific aims of this study:

1. To find out the relationship between social capital and mental health among newly registered international students.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of the building social capital program in improving the social capital among newly registered international students.
3. To describe the ways that building social capital program affects the social capital of the newly registered international students.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of the building social capital program in improving the mental health among newly registered international students.
5. To formulate a sustainable social work intervention strategy to building social capital.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

The general question of the study is “How far building social capital program able to help build social capital and how far social capital (if created) affect the mental health of the international students”? The more specific research questions are as follows:

1. Is there any significant relationship between social capital (bonding, bridging, cognitive, and structural) and mental health score among international students?
2. Is building social capital program an effective method for improving the social capital among international students?

3. How does the building social capital program affect the social capital among the experimental group?
4. Is building social capital program an effective method for improving the mental health among international students?

### **1.5 Research Null Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between social capital (bonding, bridging, cognitive, and structural) and mental health score among the international students.
2. There is no significant relationship between building social capital program and improvement of the social capital among the international students.
3. There is no significant relationship between building social capital program and improvement of the mental health among the international students.

### **1.6 Research Alternate Hypotheses**

1. Higher level of social capital (bonding, bridging, cognitive, and structural) is associated with higher level of mental health among international students.
2. There is a significant difference between the social capital score in participants of experimental and control group from before to after the intervention.
3. There is a significant difference between social capital score in the experimental group before and after the intervention.
4. There is a significant difference between the mental health score in participants of experimental and control group from before to after the intervention.
5. There is a significant difference in mental health score of the experimental group before and after the intervention.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study to the Social Work Field**

The focus of this study was the impact of building social capital on the mental health of international students at USM. This study is significant in different of ways.

First, this study responded to the recent call for research on building social capital intervention related to mental health (Carlson & Chamberlain, 2003; Edwards & Foley, 1998; Edwards et al., 2001; Facchini & Tonon Giraldo, 2012; Ferlander & Mäkinen, 2009; Field, 2003; Fujiwara & Kawachi, 2008; Iorga, 2010; Islam, Gerdtham, Gullberg, Lindstrom, & Merlo, 2008; Kawachi et al., 1999; Kawachi, Kim, Courts, & Subramanian 2004; Krishna & Uphoff, 2002; Leeder & Dominello, 1999; Li, 2010; Moss, 2002; Muntaner et al., 2001; Pearce & Davey Smith, 2003; Pilkington, 2002; Putnam, 2001; Putnam, 2001; Yip et al., 2007; Ziersch et al., 2009).

Past scholarship has generally been limited to the correlation between social capital and mental health resulting in insufficient attention to the interventional research in the area of the social capital and mental health, particularly among international students. As one of the first efforts to understand building social capital and its effect on mental health using a sample of international students, this work began to fill in this void in the literature. Many studies argued that interventional researches are crucial for understanding the complex relationship between social capital and mental health which was addressed by this dissertation.

Second, Coleman (1988) illustrates that social capital is a direct and indirect resources which are imbedded in social support/network systems among community members, friends and family. Some researchers consent that social work education, research, and practice in order to promote the knowledge of social relationships

would be better to apply the multi-dimensional framework of social capital (Cheung & Kam, 2010; Ersing & Loeffler, 2008; Loeffler et al., 2004; Mathbor, 2007). This research aimed to illustrate the importance of the social capital concept as both; theoretical and analytical models for social work micro and macro practice. Historically, social work for a long time has used social network and social support theories as those theories are matching with the person in environment perspective very well.

Unlike other research done on social capital, this research brought to light what social capital really entails, which is more than just social networks and social support system. The aim of this study was to understand the function of social capital and how it can be useful for helping social workers to connect individuals to available resources. Simultaneously, this research established a practical practice model for building social capital related to the mental health.

Third, the number of international students is on the rise in Malaysia, thus the university students are seen as a valued part of Malaysian society and their psychological health and social status should be valued too. Case in point, although this is the perception by the mainstream that college students often assume as an advantaged population but this is not the reality as they are not by any means immune to the suffering and disabilities that are related to the mental health problem. In fact, the number and severity of mental health problem between college students appear to be increasing (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

As social work practice engages individual, group, and community work, researches and social actions, so that it attempts to endorse human well-being through advancing the psychosocial situation of individuals through the development of their social situations. According to the International Federation of

Social Workers (IFSW), empowerment is known as a significant feature in social work, so that social workers take part in a foremost role in expanding the information that shaped the basement of social work practices for the empowerment of clients (Knock, 1971).

According to the description of IFSW and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), social work has been defined for 21st century as a profession that endorses social changes, problem solving in human relations, and the empowerment and freedom of people in order to improve well-being. Employing human behavior theory and social systems theory, social work interferes at the situations that people are in interaction with their environments.

Philosophy of human rights and social justice are essential to social work (Hare, 2004). Subsequently, it is important for social workers who practice in mental health area to know more about international student's mental health issues by making meaningful decisions to resolve the problems that develop into efficient intervention programs. To the researcher's knowledge, this study was one of the first studies in order to illustrate how social capital can be improved and to show the association between social capital and mental health among international students based on an action design in Malaysian universities.

Fourth, mental illness is one of the most important issues worldwide. Studies in the field of mental health lay emphasis on the interaction between psychological, social and environmental variables. Social variables aside, social capital is very comprehensiveness and its effectiveness of different levels of living has particular importance in defining mental health. Since mental health is a key input to human productivity in the promotion of mental health, the relationship between social capital and mental health should be consider as a key element.

This knowledge should be utilized in the development of any social policy aiming to improve social capital. As Shortt (2004) notes in the context of public health, the policy utility of social capital for health is still an open and complex issue. There are few interventions that explicitly try to strengthen social capital and even fewer evaluations of such interventions. This study aimed to inform public policy by clarifying what is meant by a social capital intervention and presenting the strengths and weaknesses of this intervention in the context of others from around the world that explicitly use the term. It aimed to contribute to the debate on whether and how social workers can intervene to develop social capital.

Fifth, this research applied self-help initiative with some trained social skills to construct social capital in order to improve mental health and prevent mental health problems. Until the time that Schwartz (1961) introduced the term of self-help group into the social work practice with groups, it was not common to the social work profession. Steinberg (2010) represents self-help practice as a good proof of the best social work practice. Reflecting a high essence of social work with groups, the procedure of self-help group empowers people to recognize and apply their existing strength or improve the new ones, build trustworthy, supportive and collaborative relationships, and work hand in hand together in order to achieve individual or collective psychosocial goals. The findings of the current study revealed that the building social capital program which was based on self-help initiative with some trained social skills, was effective in increasing social capital and mental health of international students. Since this study was a quasi-experimental research, it could reveal practically that how the process of self-help group can be fit well with building social the capital program.

Sixth, what the conflicting literature suggests is that social capital building may require programs to have characteristics of being both horizontal and vertical without having too much of one or the other, which may inhibit social capital building. The balance may be in an organization like the program that was applied in the current study, where it was organized in a manner that encourages its members to actively participate in the program activities and other programs on the university by sharing their experiences and duties to contribute to solve their problems. The activities and the process of teaching skills that members engaged in the current program, therefore, allowed for effective social capital building as this claim was well supported by the findings.

Seventh, important for social capital and mental health theory development is the role of mixed method research. This thesis also made an original contribution in the field of measuring social capital by using mix method. There are so many debates in regards to measuring social capital. Some of the researches in the social capital area measure social capital with instruments which are not well matched with their aims of study. Past studies have focused either on social ties and associations or on levels of trust. However, to truly measure social capital, the researcher should combine trust, social ties and social associations (Putnam 2001).

This dissertation by putting in consideration all components of social capital could overcome to this issue faced by social capital studies. As so, regarding the methodology and research instrument, the current study can be seen as a model for future studies in area of social capital and mental health research among international students in other universities.

As a conclusion, social work is a field of knowledge consisting of three elements; research, education, and professional practice, it's aspire is to ease social



problems and this mission can be achieved throughout all three elements of social work. Research must help not merely the professional practices, but also the teaching of social work methods and policy development. In terms of research methodology, social work research should take into consideration the power of societal structures, history, and nature (Mantysaan, 2005). This study attempted to cover all these elements of social work by bringing valuable policy implications for social work practice in helping the practitioners and policy makers design programs and policies suitable for particular subpopulations.

### **1.8 Organization of the Thesis**

The current study comprises five chapters. Chapter one concentrates on providing a whole view of the research topic; problem statement, objectives of the study, research questions and hypothesis. Further, the significant of the study is also in hand. Chapter two delves into a comprehensive view of the literature related to current study. The literature consists of a short illustration on what the study is intending to focus on. Further, the literature joins research questions and hypothesis of the research objectives. Moreover, chapter two delves into elaborating the deep meaning of the aspects and concepts that have been used in the research. In addition, definitions of keywords connected all over the study are also presented. Finally, the chapter provides in details the theoretical and conceptual framework.

Chapter three is discusses the research design and methodology. It begins with a brief introduction about the study, and then goes in explaining the research design and the rational reasons of choosing a mix method approach in order to complete current research. Then next, it provides an explanation of the dataset and the sampling criteria and the procedure of selecting the participants in this study. Besides, the chapter contains a very comprehensive explanation of the tools that

have been used in order to collect the data and the process of data collection. Further, it presents the validity and reliability of the data collection tools and the analysis method. Finally, in this chapter, the design of the applied intervention, the procedure of the intervention and ethical consideration are detailed.

In chapter four, the findings of data analysis are reported. This chapter demonstrates in details the analysis of quantitative data that composed of testing hypotheses by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) - Version 21, and qualitative data by applying the content analysis method using NVivo 10 software. The findings of both methods are included in the chapter as well.

Chapter 5 includes the discussion of the relationship between social capital and mental health of international students, the effectiveness of building social capital in improving their social capital and mental health. This chapter also contains the implication and recommendations for theory, policy and social work research and education. The researcher explains the limitations encountered throughout the research process and offered some direction for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Overview**

Chapter two provides an in-depth explanation of the literature about the issues and aims of current thesis. Current chapter widely reviews and analyzes the prior literature related to social capital and mental health studies. Based on the objective of the study this chapter will discuss basic terms of present study: social capital, mental health, building social capital, and international students. Mental health issue is the problem which is addressed by this study. First, this chapter will focus on the historical development of social capital, its conceptualization and measurement, its relationship with mental health and its necessity.

Second, in this chapter researcher summarized causes and consequences of mental health according previous studies and discussed mental health problems of international students. Those factors which influence mental health of international students have been explained and common assessments which are used by researchers have been introduced. Third, the chapter will discuss self-help group process, its relation to building social capital and its fundamental principles. The theoretical framework, definition of key variables, and conceptual framework are the last part of this chapter.

#### **2.2 Social Capital**

Recently, social capital became a topic of interest for many theorists. Social capital theorists argue that the theoretical pioneers of the concept of social capital can be traced back up to the eighteenth or nineteenth century or even earlier (Halpern, 2005). Scholars such as Adam Smith, Alexis De Tocqueville and Emile Durkheim have discussed in their writings about the importance of social capital

(Ferlander, 2007; Yen & Syme, 1999). Emile Durkheim was one of the first ones to link social integration with health, noting that social ties and community relations work against anomie and therefore reduced suicide rates (Halpern, 2005).

In 1916, the first use of the concept was credited to Lyda Hanifan by Robert Putnam and others (Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1993). Hanifan who was a superintendent for education in West Virginia, used the term to explain the assets that were most vital to the day-to-day emotional lives of individuals. According to Hanifan when individuals are left alone they feel they are socially helpless. But if he/she start to have relationship with his/her neighbor and the neighbor also expand relation with the other neighbors, an aggregation of social capital will be there. This social capital might right away help him/her to meet his/her social needs and even might bear a social potentiality sufficient to the significant improvement of living situation in the entire community (Putnam, 2001).

Hanifan has emphasized that, if people have relationship with outside families, in local community and the neighborhood then interpersonal relationships will be built, in the other hand such relationships will be important assets for enhancing their quality of life and can foster important educational achievements for all of those in the community. No doubt that Hanifan's call for building social capital to better educational outcomes are important and innovative for the time; however, his idea turns out to have had little impact either on government policy or on academic research in the ensuing decades.

In the 1970s, the conception of social capital was re-discovered and popularized through the seminal work of three key researchers: Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. The modern understanding of social capital is owed mainly to the writings and research of these three prominent researchers.

From a sociological point of view, Bourdieu's concern is mainly how social class and inequality are socially reproduced (Field, 2003). He is also recognized as the one who transformed social capital from metaphor into a concept (Field, 2003). Bourdieu pointed out that there were three types of capital such as economic, cultural, and social capital which are important in the competition for power and position among the social classes (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Economic capital is at the root of other types of capital; those other forms of capital are never entirely reducible to economic capital. Moreover, all three types of capital mutually reinforce each other to ensure transmission of capital within wealthy groups.

Specifically, he defines social capital as the summative of the tangible or latent resources which are connected to possession of a strong network of more or less institutionalized interactions of mutual social contacts or identifications that has several effects over the other forms of the capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In his definition, social capital contains two main benefits to which individuals have admission to the value of their involvement in groups and the relations within the groups themselves as well. Like other forms of capital (e.g., money, education, taste) critical for maintaining social class and position, social capital is valuable in order to attain resources either a long side with other forms of capital or in their absence (Bourdieu, 1986). It provides tangible advantages to privileged individuals, families and groups as long as the size of the network and the volume of other forms of capital (cultural or symbolic, economic) are associated with the volume of social capital possessed by an individual (Bourdieu, 1986).

In different words, social capital is never an independent form of capital; instead, people with better access to cultural and economic capital will generally possess larger amounts of social capital as well. Education sociologist is mostly